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## **‘He’s not the Messiah, he’s a very naughty boy!’<sup>i</sup>: Radicalising hermeneutics with Kafka’s *The Castle***

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### Keywords

*Kafka*  
*hermeneutics*  
*experience*

### Abstract

This paper explores the politics of interpretation from the perspective of hermeneutic theory. It presents a reading of Kafka’s novel *The Castle* focused on critique of the business of interpretation, where suspicion unfolds in distorted, possibly fraudulent, sense-making between protagonist, narrator and reader. The protagonist’s mission is neither heroic nor a call to resistance to bureaucratic absurdity, but instead, the result of hubris, hoax, or even a slip of the pen, and it becomes impossible to unpick the perils of bureaucracy from the perils of interpretation, or to distinguish between error and insight. In mining discrepancies between justification, effort and reward of interpretation, Kafka punctures the mythology of understanding, rupturing the near-sacrosanct hermeneutic connection between interpretation and meaning. His work undermines both objective and subjective understandings, leaving us distrustful of both expert and experiential perspectives. In a post-truth era with its ‘alternative facts’, *The Castle* feels startlingly fresh and relevant.

### A ‘turn to experience’ and the politics of interpretation

We appear to be living in an era of ‘post-truth’, where leaders and politicians have less need for the stories they spin to be true, than for them to chime with people’s experiences, regardless of the prejudices or hysteria of these experiences.<sup>ii</sup> In the contemporary discursive clash between the authority of expertise and the authority of personal experience (Gabriel, 2004), the scales may well be tipping in favour of experience. In conversations concerning the UK’s Brexit, for instance, experts have become the enemy, because their expertise does not seem grounded in an appreciation of the challenges of people’s everyday experiences.<sup>iii</sup>

This emphasis on experiential understandings in popular discourse can be related to a broader ‘turn to experience’ in intellectual and cultural conversation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Laing, 1990), and in organisation studies (OS) in particular (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Strati, 1992; Tomkins and Ulus, 2016; Zundel, 2013). With disillusionment in the power of the scientific method to grasp the complexity of human life, the voice of first-person, subjective experience becomes a

way of establishing a different form of ‘truth’: If science is motivated by the search for facts, the exploration of experience is inspired by the quest for meaning.

Seeking and creating meaning invoke processes of interpretation and sense-making, and it is in this theoretical domain that this paper is grounded. In OS, the notion of sense-making is most readily associated with the work of Weick (1995). From this perspective, sense-making is generally described as the search for plausible explanations for complex and ambiguous events (Brown et al., 2014; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Although early versions of Weickian sense-making emphasised cognition over other dimensions of ‘sense’, recently scholars have lent a more experiential tone to sense-making, encompassing phronesis (Colville et al., 2016), corporeality (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012), and mood (Holt and Cornelissen, 2014).

Predating Weick by several millennia, although less commonly referenced in OS, is the tradition of hermeneutics. A central problematic in hermeneutics is the nature of the relationship between interpretation and meaning, the reliability of which speaks to the very possibility of understanding. In classical hermeneutics, robustness of method is emphasised, and understanding is embedded in the possibility of reproducing ‘true’, original meaning (Betti, 1987; Schleiermacher, 1998). In more recent hermeneutic formulations, methodology makes way for an openness to dialogue, and an interest in significance, that is, not meaning-per-se but meaning-for-me (Gadamer, 1989). In more critically-orientated hermeneutics, there is greater focus on uncovering hidden meaning and exploring whose interests are served by keeping it hidden (Gopinath and Prasad, 2012; Ricoeur, 1970). Across all these strands of hermeneutic theory, however, there is some sort of connection between interpretation and meaning, and an assumption that understanding is possible, whether through method, dialogue or critique (Tomkins and Eatough, 2018).

Hermeneutic theory can shed light where Weickian sense-making struggles, offering powerful ways to approach the question of how we interpret the ‘texts’ of our experience.<sup>iv</sup> For instance, the criticism of Weick for his narrow temporal focus on the past and narrow contextual focus on specific trigger events (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015) is irrelevant for hermeneutics, where historicity is woven into the very fabric of understanding, and text and context are co-constitutive in a process of hermeneutic circling (Gallagher, 1992; Ricoeur, 1970). Hermeneutic interpretation is likened to joining an ongoing cultural conversation that neither started nor will finish with any one of us individually (Gadamer, 1989).

The Weickian perspective has also been criticised for downplaying the politics of sense-making (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Hermeneutics, on the other hand, has long been concerned with the ideology of interpretation, expressed most elegantly in the motif of a hermeneutic circling between faith and suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970). A hermeneutics of faith involves a fundamental motivation to believe in text, whether literal, symbolic or experiential. In classical hermeneutics, there is faith that the original meaning of a text will endure (Betti, 1987; Schleiermacher, 1998). With Gadamer (1989), faith becomes optimism in the possibility of intersubjective connection and mutual understanding in a hermeneutic ‘fusion of horizons’.

A hermeneutics of suspicion, on the other hand, challenges the trustworthiness of text and urges us to reach behind surface meanings to try to tease out other hidden meanings. In this mode, we are at least as interested in what is concealed as in what is revealed (Ricoeur, 1970). For hermeneuticists of suspicion, the task of interpretation is to expose these multiple meanings, not in order to resolve conflicts between different belief systems, but rather to highlight the contingencies, motivations and implications of their construction. From this perspective, hermeneutics is a project of critical reflection: Every interpretation must come under suspicion for being inspired and enabled by relations of power (Habermas, 1967).

In our day-to-day lives, hermeneutic reflection involves alternating between faith and suspicion. If we were only ever suspicious of text, it would never really resonate with us; and this would undermine those genres that demand at least a degree of identification between reader, author and protagonists, such as fiction and propaganda. But if we were only ever to have faith in text, we would have none of the critical faculties required to make our own authentic sense of it. So, when others construct text for us to interpret, they are manipulating - consciously or unconsciously - our desire for faith and our capacity to cope with insecurity when faith proves illusive. As interpreters and sense-makers, we can tolerate being suspicious of X only because we have faith in Y, where Y might be our trust in the speaker, or indeed merely our trust in our own ability to ask good questions (Gallagher, 1992).

From a hermeneutic perspective, the politics of interpretation unfolds in the ways in which faith and suspicion are deployed, in both the stories told by others and those we tell ourselves. It is now quite commonplace to argue that organisations are narratological spaces, in which organisational members produce and reproduce stories which legitimise some understandings, actions and identities over others (Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 1997). Narratives of organisation appear in a number of guises, including films and other artefacts of popular culture, such as management best-sellers (Czarniawska and Rhodes, 2006; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2016).

In this paper, I focus on one particular narrative form, the novel. The novel is a relatively recent literary genre, and its rise to pre-eminence can be connected to the emergence of reading as a private activity, in contrast to more public performances of epic poetry or dramaturgy (Lukács and Lukács, 1971; Watt, 2001). As reading becomes a more intimate and personal experience, the stories similarly become more intimate, personal and experiential. Thus, if our aim is to explore the complexities of the lived experience of organisation (Phillips, 1995; Rhodes and Brown, 2005), the novel is an especially promising literary genre. The novel both presents and evokes an experiential understanding of the world.

The novel I explore is Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (Kafka, 1926). This was the last of Kafka's three novels and remained 'unfinished not by accident but in principle' (Pascal, 1982, p.192) at the time of his death. It is noted for its peculiarly complex and shifting relationship between protagonist, narrator and reader (Harman, 1996; Sheppard, 1973), inviting scrutiny of what is happening in the interpretive web between them. Kafka scholars have long argued that *The Castle* is not just open to multiple interpretations, but is - more fundamentally - about the business of interpretation itself (Sokel, 1966; Woods, 2014). It challenges us to reflect on how and why interpretation can distort and deceive as much as explain and enlighten; and what, in Kafka's world, remains once meaning and understanding disintegrate.

With this analysis, I connect with a growing body of Kafka-inspired scholarship on organisation (Beck Jorgensen, 2012; Keenoy and Seijo, 2009; Kornberger and Clegg, 2003; McCabe, 2015; Parker, 2005; Rhodes and Westwood, 2016). I draw on literary Kafka scholarship (Harman, 1996; Sheppard, 1973) to highlight the particular significance of the theme of interpretation: Rather than focusing on the horrors of bureaucracy, as OS scholars have tended to do, I examine the interpretive processes through which these horrors are presented, experienced and contested. The paper therefore builds on work on Kafka and sense-making (Munro and Huber, 2012), but it is grounded in hermeneutic rather than Weickian theory.

This paper is a response to calls for greater use of hermeneutics in OS (Gabriel, 1991; Myers, 2015), and for reflection on the relationship between interpretation and meaning (Gallagher, 1992) and its implications for a critical analysis of organisation (Prasad, 2002). It is motivated by the suggestion that a nuanced appreciation of sense-making involves both philosophical insight and poetic artistry (Colville et al., 2016), and that few artists speak to the dysfunctions of institution as powerfully as Kafka (Munro and Huber, 2012). In an era where personal experience is being granted unusual privilege (Gabriel, 2004), examination of the novelist's skill can shed light on the dynamics and deceptions of sense-making, and the effects of the interplay of faith and suspicion on the very possibility of understanding.

The paper is structured as follows. It begins with a brief overview of the plot of the novel and some of its key interpretations from literary scholarship and, more recently, from OS. This sets the scene for an exploration of the complexities of *The Castle*'s narrative approach and the ways in which these destabilise interpretation. The paper considers three interrelated techniques through which Kafka problematises our understanding of events. These relate to the reliability of the protagonist, K; the work of the narrator in undermining interpretive confidence through the use of discrepancy; and the use of humour and innuendo in many of the more striking instances of this discrepancy. The paper concludes by reflecting on the relevance of these ideas for both OS readings of Kafka and the development of a radicalised hermeneutics.

## Interpretations of *The Castle*

One wintry night, the protagonist, K, arrives in a snow-bound village dominated by the Castle of Count Westwest. He declares himself to be the land-surveyor appointed by the authorities, and the remainder of the novel recounts his attempts to gain official recognition and be admitted to the Castle. He has various encounters with people in the village and Castle representatives, all of whom reveal aspects of their own experiences with officialdom and give him advice about what he should do to progress his claim. As the novel draws towards a close, K does not seem to be any closer to gaining admittance, but he has secured a presence, of sorts, in village life.

*The Castle* has inspired a huge range of interpretations, encompassing biblical, psychoanalytic, Marxist, existential, and other framings. Some of the most famous readings have seen it as religious allegory, with K's efforts to be accepted by the Castle representing man's yearning for spiritual salvation (Muir, 1930; Tauber, 1948). Others have traced autobiographical aspects, relating K's struggles to Kafka's anguished relationship with his father (Brod, 1992; Canetti, 1974). Interpretations differ over seemingly fundamental questions such as whether K undergoes some sort of transformation over the course of the novel, and whether we should see the authorities as malevolent or benevolent (Sheppard, 1973; Woods, 2014).

Organisational scholars have, understandably, mostly been drawn to *The Castle's* depiction of nonsensical and inhuman systems of institution. Much has been made of the connections between Kafka and Weber, and their alternative views of bureaucracy and power (Clegg et al., 2016; Warner, 2007). Kafka captures the senselessness of organisational routine and the unfathomable relationships between general principles and particular cases (Hodson et al., 2013) and official versus unofficial ways of doing things (Hodson et al., 2012). Impotence, carelessness and even cruelty come to characterise the actions of members of the Kafkaesque institution (McCabe, 2015). If one gets any sense of progress towards a goal, this is by accident or by chance, not because of inherent efficiencies or virtues of the system or indeed, of any of the people exposed to it (Beck Jorgensen, 2012).

In the world of the Castle, misinterpretation and misunderstanding abound (Munro and Huber, 2012). There are countless examples of characters not understanding what seem to be simply stated sentences; of having to speak on behalf of one another because of breakdowns in communication; of competing versions of events, without any sense of which of their interpreters is most trustworthy; and of individual texts being subjected to agonisingly varied, usually seemingly baseless, interpretations. As Woods (2014) suggests, this is a novel whose momentum is powered by the interpretation of text. From this perspective, the insights of *The Castle* emerge not from seeing the chaos of institution as straightforwardly 'real', but rather, from seeing this chaos as entangled in a web of interpretive complexity and instability.

### Unsettling interpretation: Issues of trust and identification with K

One of the most unsettling features of *The Castle* is the attitude of its central protagonist, K, and specifically, the problem of whether we can believe in his version of events enough to identify or empathise with him. The question of K's trustworthiness is posed right at the start of the novel, with his arrival in the village and his first claims to legitimacy of employment. Critics note the curious and ambiguous circumstances of K's appointment as land-surveyor, but it is all too easy - *especially in OS* - to assume that this is a symptom of the disorganisation of the Castle and its haphazard communication with the village below (Sheppard, 1973; Steinberg, 1965). But whether K is who he claims to be is an important issue. If we suspend our assumption that K is a victim of nonsensical bureaucracy, and take a more critical view of his role in the construction of events, we find little evidence to support K's claim either that he is a land-surveyor or that he was hired by the Castle.

For instance, upon arriving in the village and being asked to prove that he has permission to be on Castle property, K seems surprised, asking (p.2):

*"What village have I wandered into? So there is a Castle here?" "Why, of course," the young man said slowly, while several peasants here and there shook their heads at K, "the Castle of Count Westwest".*

At this point, K seems to have got here by accident; there is nothing to suggest a purposeful visit to take up an official appointment. Very quickly, however, this sense of K's innocence disintegrates. Annoyed by the apparent complexities of obtaining permission, and wanting to be allowed to return to his slumbers, he says (p.3):

*"Enough of this comedy," said K in a remarkably soft voice as he lay down and pulled up the blanket: "You are going a little too far, young man, and I shall deal with your conduct tomorrow. The landlord and those gentlemen there will be my witnesses, should I even need witnesses. Besides, be advised that I am the land-surveyor sent for by the Count. My assistants and the equipment are coming tomorrow by carriage. I didn't want to deprive myself of a long walk through the snow, but unfortunately lost my way a few times, which is why I arrived so late. That*

*it was too late then to report to the Castle is something that was already apparent to me without the benefit of your instructions. That's also the reason why I decided to content myself with these lodgings, where you have been so impolite - to put it mildly - as to disturb me. I have nothing further to add to that statement. Good night, gentlemen." And K turned toward the stove.*

*"Land-surveyor?" he heard someone asking hesitantly behind his back, and then everyone was silent.*

Attempts are then made to contact the Castle to check the status of this visitor. The first call elicits a denial of K's claim, but this is quickly followed by a second call in which K's claim is apparently legitimised. Of course, this can be read as indicating the inefficiency of the Castle's operational procedures, and is the first of several instances of shambolic telephone communications. But K's reaction to the apparent success of his claim raises suspicion over who he really is (p.5):

*K listened intently. So, the Castle had appointed him land-surveyor. On one hand, this was unfavourable, for it showed that the Castle had all necessary information about him, had assessed the opposing forces, and was taking up the struggle with a smile. On the other hand, it was favourable, for it proved to his mind that they underestimated him and that he would enjoy greater freedom than he could have hoped for at the beginning. And if they thought they could keep him terrified all the time simply by acknowledging his surveyorship - though this was certainly a superior move on their part - then they were mistaken, for he felt only a slight shudder, that was all.*

This seems a very curious reaction from someone who has just had his version of events verified by the authorities. Why should they be engaging in struggle or battle (*Kampf*) if all that is at stake is recognition of a job offer? If K really is a land-surveyor hired by the Castle, why would it be 'unfavourable' that the authorities should acknowledge him? And why should he assume that such acknowledgement would be designed to keep him 'terrified'? Something is very odd with K's reading of events.

This sense of K's unreliability is underscored by the ambivalent status and qualifications of his two assistants. In the passage where K first announces his identity as land-surveyor (above), we hear that he is expecting his assistants to arrive tomorrow. But when the two men do arrive, K does not recognise them, and his subsequent conversations with them are riddled with contradiction (pp.16-17):

*"Who are you?" he asked, glancing from one to the other. "Your assistants," they answered. "Those are the assistants," said the landlord softly in confirmation. "What?" asked K, "you are the old assistants whom I told to join me and am expecting?" They said yes. "It's a good thing," said K, after a little while, "it's a good thing that you have come." "By the way," said K after another little while, "you're very late, you've been most negligent!" "It was such a long way," said one of the assistants. "A long way," repeated K, "but when I met you, you were coming from the Castle." "Yes," they said, without further explanation. "Where did you put the instruments?" asked K. "We don't have any," they said. "The instruments I entrusted you with," said K. "We don't have any," they repeated. "Oh, you're a fine sort!" said K, "do you know anything about surveying?" "No," they said. "But if you are my old assistants, then you must know something about it," said K. They remained silent. "Well, come along, then," said K, pushing them ahead into the inn.*

So, we are thrust into a world where things do not make sense, and where systems and institutions cannot be relied on for efficiency or consistency. In focusing on the inadequacies of institution, however, we should not gloss over K's own inefficiencies and inconsistencies. In short, we should be just as suspicious of K as we are of the authorities (Harman, 1996; Sokel, 1966; Steinberg, 1965). As Sheppard (1973, p.67) argues, 'much has been written about the "absurd",

“Kafkaesque” quality of the world of Kafka’s novels, but it needs to be remembered that the distortion and absurdity lie to a very great extent in the consciousness of the person through whom that world is viewed. It is not so much that the world of the Castle and the village is inherently incomprehensible, but that it is incomprehensible to K.’ In other words, before assuming that the chaos of the system is ‘real’, we should consider whether K’s assessment of it is entirely trustworthy. As the landlady of the inn will later say about K and his interpretive quirks (p.113):

*“He’s always like this, Secretary, he’s always like this. Distorts the information given to him, then claims he’s been given the wrong information!”*

Interpretations of K as a hapless victim of soulless bureaucracy are, therefore, but one way of approaching this text. K may, indeed, be a victim of error (Munro and Huber, 2012), but he is just as likely to be its perpetrator. His misinterpretations and misrepresentations may be as fraudulent as Sokel (1966) suggests, or they could stem from his arrogance and carelessness (Sheppard, 1973). We are never able to work out which elements of his shambolic appointment and subsequent petitions are true versus false; and if they are false, we can never tell whether the fault lies in inattention, sloppiness or wilful deception. Kafka denies us any grasp on the true nature of K, his qualifications or motivations, and thereby dashes the reader’s expectations of identification with the ‘hero’ which are such a central feature of the genre of the novel.

### Unsettling interpretation: An ambiguous narrative presence

Further complicating our interpretive efforts is the presence of a seemingly unreliable narrator (Booth, 1961; Harman, 1996; Woods, 2014). *The Castle*’s peculiar narrative approach involves an almost complete absence of explicit editorial judgement except on a few, and hence, noticeable occasions (Sheppard, 1973). This narrator is neither a classically omniscient presenter of events (because if he were, surely he would be able to tidy things up and present them more coherently to us?), nor is he speaking from exactly the same perspective as K (for if he were, we would get more of a feeling for K’s motivations and inner world, and less of a surprise when K does things we were not expecting). Although we see *almost* everything through K’s eyes, the narrator lurks here, too, creating a story in which K sees more than he is aware of seeing, and experiences more than he understands.

As Sheppard (1973) elaborates, Kafka uses a range of alienation devices to signal the distance between the narrator and K, and to keep drawing our attention to the fact that this is a story in which not everything we see or hear is necessarily true. Principal amongst these is the use of discrepancy: for instance, between K’s version of events and other characters’ interpretations; between K’s emotional reactions and their apparent justification; and between K’s intentions and his actions. K gets incredibly angry at things which to us seem relatively benign. He frequently accuses others of being rude or inconsiderate to him, when we cannot see that the behaviour in question is especially egregious. Of course, K’s bad temper *could* be read as frustration with being worn down by a nonsensical system of institution; but it also serves to make us notice the psychological gaps in the story, thereby disrupting our efforts to understand, empathise or identify with K.

As well as psychological gaps, there are temporal discrepancies which undermine the coherence of the story. For instance, there are sudden jumps in time, with night falling after only a couple of hours of day-light. Characters berate K for taking too long to get to them, when it seems to us that he has only been away for a few minutes. Such temporal jumps affect relationships, too, with Frieda falling in love with K ludicrously soon after their first encounter, and sudden lurches between contempt and congeniality in the relationship between K and the landlady. The reader is often left pondering, where did *that* come from? Once again, of course, this sense of temporal discrepancy could be interpreted as symptomatic of the strangeness of the world into which K has been plunged. However, it also functions to make us notice the work of narration and reflect on what this does to our experience as readers.

Of particular relevance for this paper is the discrepancy between the apparent triviality of objects, especially letters, and the obsessiveness with which they are interpreted. For instance, the first letter from the arch-bureaucrat Klammm, which apparently confirms K’s acceptance into Castle service, consists of nine lines of text which, in the mind of the reader at least, say almost nothing useful or original and end with a cliché about the importance of having happy employees. Indeed, so banal is this missive that it seems to us to be the sort of standard letter issued by institutions to cover generic

circumstances. K, however, pores over this letter to mine it for nuances of significance, and returns to it time and time again in the chapters to come. It is as if the letter contains some sort of gospel truth swaddled in layers of hermeneutic richness. This is just one of the objects that provide a focus for K's self-indulgent and ultimately senseless over-interpretation, highlighting an enormous discrepancy between interpretive justification, effort and reward. As the landlady of the inn will later say (p.80):

*"You misinterpret everything, even the silence. You simply cannot help it."*

In addition to such psychological, temporal and interpretive discrepancies, our narrator destabilises meaning through word-play. There are multiple instances of words being used which suggest the possibility of other words, and hence conjure up potentially radically different interpretations. One of the most startling examples of this concerns K's alleged professional identity. Critics have highlighted the etymological connection between the German words *Landvermesser* (land-surveyor) and *Vermessenheit* (hubris) (Damrosch, 2003; Woods, 2014). Sheppard (1973) suggests that K's pulling the blanket over himself (the first scene quoted) is designed to highlight his professional deception: the German word for blanket (*Decke*) also means cover as in cover-story; K is both literally and metaphorically 'under cover'. Such semantic slipperiness is a key feature of the narrative texture of this novel.

I have called the narrative presence ambiguous, because I think there are at least two readings of what the narrator is doing with these discrepancies. Sheppard (1973), for instance, thinks that the narrator's purpose is to warn the reader against making the same interpretive errors that K makes, that is, mistakes based on excessive over-interpretation along with arrogance, narcissism, neurosis and lack of attentiveness to the world around him. *The Castle* thus becomes a didactic warning against the perils of excessive, uncritical faith in our interpretive efforts, urging us to keep our suspicious acumen alive when we approach any sort of text.

Another reading, not necessarily contradictory, is that the narrative approach suggests 'cock-up' as much as 'conspiracy', that is, that the discrepancies are to be read as sloppiness, and the linguistic discrepancies, in particular, are merely slips of the pen. Changing the meaning of text through the transposing of one or two letters in a word, or using one word by mistake for another, seem to me to be a specifically bureaucratic form of error. In other words, the flaws of bureaucracy soak into the very telling of the story; they are not just related to the events and routines that the story is purportedly about.

Whether 'cock-up' or 'conspiracy', accidental or deliberate, the presence and attitude of the narrator complicate our efforts at understanding, and prevent any stable, singular interpretation. We detect the narrator's presence as someone separate from K, but this narrator does not give us any secure purchase on the events of the story to compensate for K's untrustworthiness. This narrator could be hugely skilled, or hugely unskilled. He might well be a 'ray of light' (Sheppard, 1973, p.126) pointing to subtle patterns of significance that are simply beyond K, but may be discernible by the astute reader; or he could be a lazy, error-prone bureaucrat, not bothering to spell things correctly. Insight and error are impossible to disentangle.

### Unsettling interpretation: Kafka, the jokester

Despite initial resistance amongst critics to detect any 'riddling element' (Pasley, 1971), Kafka scholars now increasingly focus on the importance of his linguistic trickery, highlighting his place within the German comic tradition (Weitzman, 2014) and his connections with Yiddish comic theatre (Robertson, 1985). Kafka prepared the manuscript of *The Castle* to be read aloud to friends and colleagues (Damrosch, 2003). This suggests that acoustic innuendo, double-entendres and issues of comic timing are significant aspects of Kafka's own experiences with this work. Indeed, I think its approach harks back to Classical Greek comedy, where the Chorus mocks and undermines the characters on stage as if to say, 'Beware! I wouldn't trust this one, if I were you!'

One of the most delightful examples of word-play in *The Castle* relates to a pun based on the almost identical Hebrew words, *mashoah* (land-surveyor) and *mashiah* (Messiah) (Robertson, 1985). The altering of a single letter creates two radically different interpretive possibilities for who K is supposed to be and how the inhabitants of the Castle and the village ought to respond to him. If one re-reads *The Castle* with Messiah rather than land-surveyor in mind, then certain behaviours take on a different complexion. When the peasants crowd round K, for instance, is it because they think he has



come to offer them salvation? When the maids at the inn freeze at the very sight of him, and those who hear his first identity claim (in the passage cited earlier) fall silent, are they perhaps in awe of his numinous presence? Such confusion between the exalted and the mundane provides a seam of utter comic absurdity throughout the novel.

The possibility of a mix-up between the identities of saviour, on one hand, and mere technocrat, on the other, punctures efforts to see K as a heroic figure. Indeed, Robertson (1985) sees *The Castle* as a pastiche on notions of spiritual leadership, because K's claims to leadership status are so comically fragile. From one angle, K is on some messianic, transformational mission, but this is then hilariously undermined by the hint that his missionary zeal might be based on a slip of the tongue or a spelling mistake. Any attempt to find in K an inspirational leader or a hero of the resistance is thus destined to be seriously disappointed. Indeed, the joke over whether K is the long-awaited saviour or a lowly technician inspires the title of this paper, with its reference to Monty Python's very Kafkaesque *Life of Brian*: '*He's not the Messiah, he's a very naughty boy!*'

Much of the humour in *The Castle* revolves around interpretive mix-ups such as this *mashoah/mashiah* pun. Misinterpretations create fools, especially when they become the basis for fervent action. K's endeavours become ridiculous, and many of the characters serve to lampoon the absurdity of his search for certainty and acceptance. This is particularly the case with the assistants, who parody the futility of K's seemingly purposeful quest with their complete inability to accomplish anything, complaining all the while that K's problem is that he cannot take a joke.

If the assistants hold up a mirror to K to warn him that he is in danger of ridicule, the narrator holds up an equivalent mirror to warn us of a similar risk (Sheppard, 1973). As readers, we risk becoming the butt of the joke if we do not manage to unpick - or at least acknowledge - the complexity, duplicity and hilarity of the narrative web. If we persist in reading *The Castle* as a straightforward critique of bureaucracy, we are falling for Kafka's great hoax. As Sokel (1966, p.32) suggests, any such interpretation is 'the result of the critics being duped by K's colossal fraud', in which we are tricked into believing that the source of chaos, incompetence, malevolence and injustice lies with the Castle authorities and their inadequate procedures. In this reading, the main theme of this novel is K's efforts to persuade everyone, including the reader, that bureaucracy is the problem. The joke is on us if we buy into this interpretation of events.

## Connections and contributions

The ideas in this paper are offered as something of a counterweight to an apparent desire in OS to see in Kafka's work an ideology of resistance. Kafka's depiction of the senselessness of institutional routine is, indeed, unnerving. It is therefore understandable that commentators should be drawn to seeing him as an industrial reformer, concerned with righting the wrongs of mistreated workers (Wasserman, 2002) and advocating for bureaucracy's victims (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2015). For instance, McCabe (2014; 2015) finds Kafka an inspiration for resistance to the stultifying effects of bureaucracy, suggesting that we should not underestimate the agency both of Kafka's protagonists and of organisational practitioners to resist, subvert and undermine the system. Clegg et al. (2016) suggest that care might be an antidote to the dehumanising nightmare of the bureaucratic world, and that processes and systems that are constructed can be reconstructed differently. Hodson et al. (2012; 2013) use their analysis of Kafka to call for greater levels of democracy, accountability and transparency to counterbalance the corruptions of bureaucracy.

These readings have an intuitive appeal, but they underestimate the extent to which any interpretation we develop risks being so unreliable that it cannot be trusted to grasp the problem of bureaucracy, let alone point to any straightforward solution. *The Castle* is less a call to action or resistance than a mockery of such instincts; indeed, it mocks any sort of zeal, whether of defiance, salvation, truth-seeking or transformation (Robertson, 1985). I do not, therefore, read Kafka as depicting an alternative framework for organisation or a blueprint for change, because any such reading underestimates the narrative complexity and unreliability, and the humour that both fuels and flows from it. Kafka is a tease. He stops us taking ourselves, our work and our zeal too seriously, that is, too *faithfully*. He lures us (and his protagonists) into imagining that 'with a change of perspective, one could find order, system and clarity' (Beck Jorgensen, 2012, p.209), but this is a massive con. In *The Castle*, the zealous impulse is played for laughs.

The subversive appeal of *The Castle* is thus a subversion through humour. The jokes and double-entendres foster an engagement with, and enjoyment of, the story even in the face of the most nonsensical, frustrating of events. Thus, this paper supports calls for greater attention to the humour of organisational experience (Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993; Westwood and Rhodes, 2013). Humour is not just background noise in institutional life, but a way of acknowledging difficult

relationships with the world by crafting alternative ways of seeing things (Holmes, 2007; Kornberger et al., 2006), creating a currency for intersubjective connection and making it at least a little more bearable to carry on. As Gabriel (1991) suggests, tricksters can be humanity's champions against The Machine. To date, however, analysis of Kafka's humour has been striking in its absence in OS readings of his work.

By focusing on the complexities of narrative, this analysis also differs from those which see Kafka as identifying with his under-dog protagonists (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2015; Warner, 2007), arguing that these miss the crucial disconnects between perspectives that contribute to the reader's sense of unease, frustration and enjoyment. We miss the skill of Kafka's story-telling if we see K as Kafka-in-disguise, and we will certainly miss out on the jokes which operate specifically and purposefully beyond K's awareness. We may well feel sympathy for, and a degree of identification with, Gregor Samsa in the *Metamorphosis* or Josef K in *The Trial*, but in K we have someone quite different. Kafka's literary output is rich and diverse, in form and in substance, and we should not carry the same assumptions and expectations from one work to the next (Pascal, 1982), despite the persistence of the letter K!

*The Castle's* techniques of faith lure us into trying to find stable, recognisable meaning because things are presented as real, indeed, über-real, with sharp and precise depiction of mundane and seemingly trivial detail (Daniel-Rops, 1963; Woods, 2014). Just like his characters who are drawn into tortured over-interpretation of letters, tokens and objects, so we are seduced into over-interpreting his world through its apparent realism and familiarity. As Munro and Huber (2012, p.536) suggest, Kafka uses the plausibility of the things he depicts 'as a means of drawing us ever deeper into the labyrinthine folds of an indecipherable social order'.

Moreover, Kafka toys with our desire to believe and understand by giving us a protagonist who seems so extraordinarily supercilious and self-assured - at least initially - and so confident that he alone understands what is going on and is qualified to explain it to others (Sheppard, 1973): If K believes he can navigate this world, then so should we. And if we feel we are losing a sense of connection with the narrative, Kafka draws us back into the story with the jokes and double-entendres that only an insider would appreciate. Having ensnared us with the clarity of his style, the plausibility of his events and the connective tissue of his humour, Kafka then systematically undercuts and undermines our hermeneutic faith through his web of disjunctures and discrepancies. He mocks our attempts to identify and believe, and insists that we move into a mode of suspicion, offering only the possibility of laughter as consolation.

*The Castle* is thus a work of suspicious mastery (Munro and Huber, 2012) and alienation (Sheppard, 1973). It mounts a radical challenge to what we think we know, feel and believe, that is, to subjective experience itself. Just as K's conscious experience is out of joint with what the narrator allows us to see and hear, so there is no reason to imagine that our conscious experience is any more reliable, and the clues and hints given by the narrator are as likely to mislead as lead. To my mind, this approach aligns Kafka with the modern masters of hermeneutic suspicion, Freud, Marx and Nietzsche (Ricoeur, 1970). In their various ways, these three argue that meaning is not reducible to the conscious experience of meaning, seeing symbol as the representation of false consciousness and distorted sense-making.

Indeed, Kafka goes even further than Freud, Marx or Nietzsche to dent our confidence in interpretation and sense-making; for Kafka offers much less of an explanation for what might lie beyond consciousness and whose interests are served by keeping it there. Whilst they propose some sort of system, structure or at least logic to whatever is happening outside the realm of conscious experience, he challenges, indeed, mocks, any such possibility. In Kafka, there seems to be no systematic alternative truth hiding behind the scenes just waiting to be discovered. Or, if there is a truth, it is one which will forever be beyond our ability to fathom it (Sheppard, 1973). Indeed, within the hermeneutic tradition, Kafka's suspicion finds perhaps its closest echo in Habermas (1967), insofar as the latter urges us to break away from hermeneutic circling to reflect critically on the distortions of tradition to which it subjects us. Unlike Habermas, however, Kafka gives us no transcendental view, no meta-hermeneutics with which to decipher the systematic deceptions of sense-making. Kafka's central concern is to highlight the incompatibility of consciousness and being (Robertson, 1985); he shakes our faith in the former and denies us any systematic explanation for the latter.

Kafka radicalises hermeneutics, because he splinters the relationship between interpretation and meaning which lies at the very heart of the hermeneutic tradition (Gadamer, 1989; Gallagher, 1992). All we seem to have is competing and incomplete versions of events, all of which are suspicious multiple times over, and no meta-perspective from which to make sense of them. The most we can expect is a sense of recognition of the world he depicts; but this is recognition

without the consolations of understanding. So, whilst I agree with Munro and Huber (2012) that Kafka's counter-mythology seeks to undermine the dominant modern myths of family and bureaucracy, I also believe he destroys another, arguably more fundamental, myth - the myth of understanding, and the necessity of a relationship between interpretation and meaning.

Crucially, however, Kafka's destruction of the myth of understanding does not stop us interpreting: Quite the contrary. Camus (1955, p.120) suggests that 'the whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to re-read. His endings, or his absence of endings, suggest explanations which, however, are not revealed in clear language but, before they seem justified, require that the story be re-read from another point of view.' Each reading throws up new possibilities of interpretation, whilst warning against latching onto any one of them as definitive. This is consistent with the notion of organisation as discursive construction, where the success of any single interpretation is surely the victory of a dominant discourse over other possible voices, perspectives and selves (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004; Hardy et al., 2000).

Thus, I am not saying that *The Castle* cannot be read as a critique of bureaucracy; indeed, such a reading is surely part of why this novel resonates with us even whilst it does not make sense in any traditional, thematic way. My argument is rather that our suspicions about bureaucracy should be set within a more devastating set of suspicions about both the interpretation of experience and the experience of interpretation, and about what these say about us as sense-makers. The texts of experience are spaces of deception, seduction and confusion - of both self and others (Gabriel, 2004; Gherardi, 2003); hence, our reading of a novel like *The Castle* says as much about our own identity struggles and desires as K's. We might well reflect on why both we and K are so certain about how things ought to work, and so angry when our progress is thwarted. This might help us to appreciate how ridiculous this makes both us and him. Rather than faith being the bed-rock from which suspicion can be tolerated (Gadamer, 1989; Gallagher, 1992), it is suspicion and untrustworthiness which characterise our human readings, and faith is played for laughs. Striving for a balance between belief and doubt may well represent wisdom for Weick (1995); but for a Kafka-inspired hermeneutics, belief makes fools of us. The fact that we continue to try to find coherent systems of meaning in *The Castle* speaks both to the novelist's skill and to the reader's desires.

## Final thoughts

This paper has presented ideas from hermeneutic theory and literary studies to enhance our appreciation of the skill and wit of Kafka's *The Castle*. It has pushed past interpretations of the Kafkaesque bureaucracy as nightmarishly chaotic to explore what happens when we question the reliability of protagonist and narrator, recognise the limitations of our interpretive grasp as readers, and thereby unsettle the very foundations of our engagement with text. Narrative unreliability was given a set of specifically bureaucratic twists, weaving a Kafkaesque critique of bureaucracy into the very fabric of sense-making and story-telling, and making it nigh-on impossible to distinguish between error and insight in protagonist, narrator or reader.

In an era where appeals to subjective experience are used to undermine the voices of expertise, reason, logic and facts, Kafka offers a startlingly fresh and relevant illustration of the untrustworthiness of the texts of experience, whether authored by ourselves or by others. He punctures the mythology of understanding, leaving us in a world where we all interpret obsessively and neurotically, but have little purchase on meaning, and no clear steer for how to think or feel, let alone organise, differently. As Burnham (1947, p.103) suggests, 'Kafka pours on the body of the world a kind of acid, which dissolves all the connective tissue, leaving only the discrete elements of an organism', and we are left with the challenge of how to make sense of this carcass when there is no truth or reliability of understanding, even from - indeed, especially from - the evidence of our own subjective experience. Kafka undermines our confidence in both the tools and the motivations of interpretation; and he dents our faith in the possibility of meaning, which was supposed to be our consolation in a post-truth world. This leaves us unanchored by either objective or subjective understandings, either expert or experiential perspectives. In a world of 'alternative facts', therefore, the most Kafkaesque response is probably to laugh.

<sup>i</sup> From Monty Python's Life of Brian. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zjz16xjeBAA>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/press/news/2016/12/11/WOTY-16>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/10/michael-goves-guide-to-britains-greatest-enemy-the-experts/>

<sup>iv</sup> In this paper, I side-step debates about the relative ranking of 'sense-making' and 'interpretation', including which is a subset of the other. Work in both Weickian and hermeneutic traditions has sometimes privileged cognition over other features of our engagement with the world.

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